

All-You-Can-Eat Buffet

How scavengers—from grizzly bears to blowflies—fill their bellies while decomposing an elk carcass

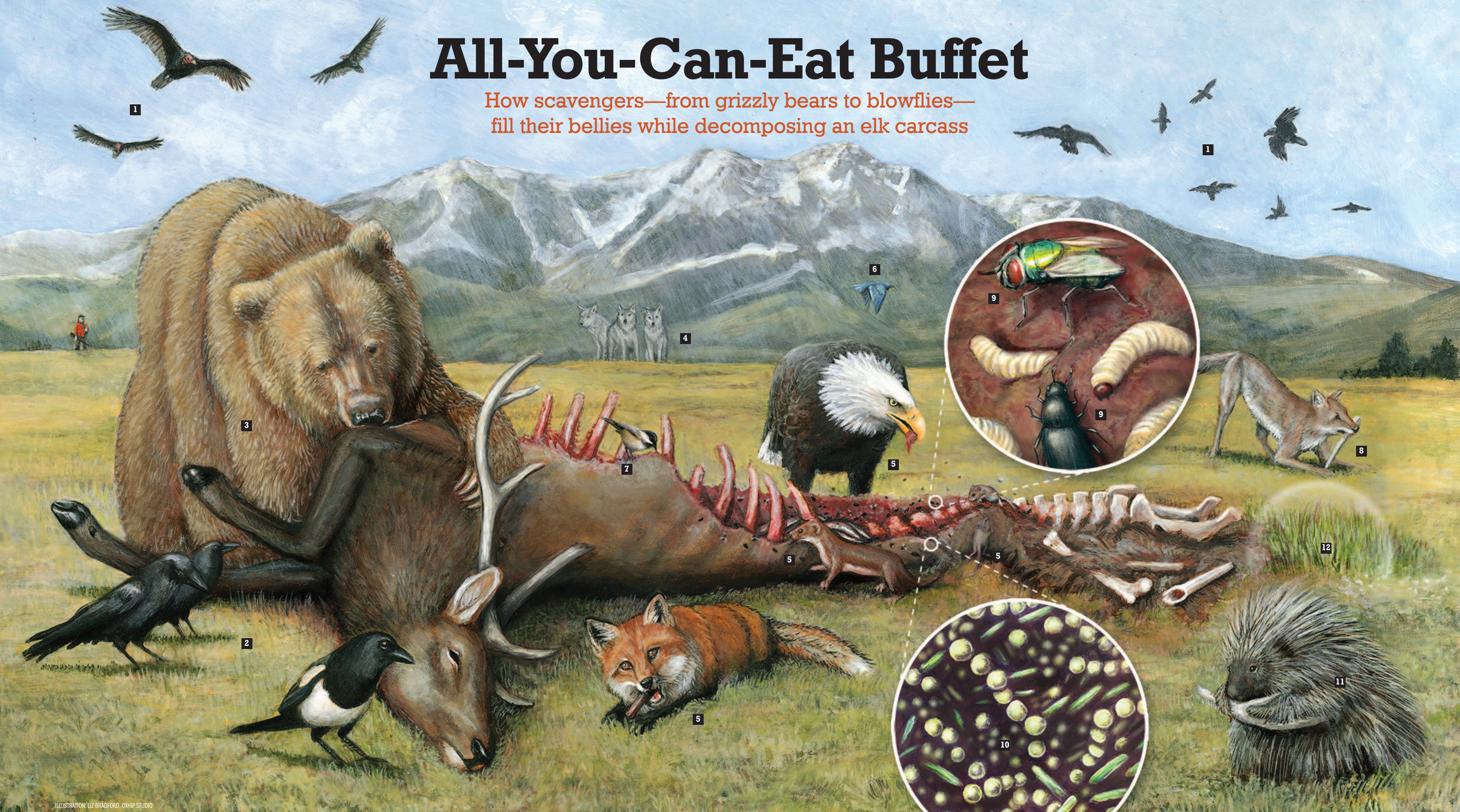


ILLUSTRATION: LIZ BRADFORD, OXHIP STUDIO

An elk carcass can show up for many reasons: the animal died of starvation, old age, predation, or from a hunter who was unable to recover the animal in time. **1.** The first scavengers to arrive are turkey vultures, ravens, and magpies, which spot the carcass from the air. **2.** The birds are not strong enough

to tear open the carcass, so they can only peck at the soft eyes and anus until larger scavengers show up. **3.** It takes the powerful jaws of a grizzly bear or gray wolf to tear through the elk's thick hide and expose the insides to other scavengers. **4.** Wolves will keep their distance until a grizzly eats its fill.

5. Once the "buffet door" has been opened, smaller scavengers such as eagles, foxes, weasels, mice, and shrews can begin eating. None of the carcass goes to waste. **6.** Mountain bluebirds and other bird species may take tufts of elk hair to line their nests. **7.** Black-capped chickadees will peck

at scraps of fat left on the ribs. Wolves will break open thigh bones and eat the rich marrow inside. **8.** A coyote might find a broken bone and gnaw it for marrow, meat, and fat scraps. **9.** Blowflies alight on exposed body portions and lay eggs that hatch into maggots, which, along with carrion

and dermestid beetles, feed on moist tissue. **10.** At a microscopic level, bacteria, fungi, and other "decomposers" further break down tissue. **11.** Even the antlers are consumed by porcupines and

other rodents, who gnaw at the hardened bone to wear down their teeth. **12.** Bone dust, hair, and microbes enter and enrich the soil. In time the soil will grow plants such as bunchgrass that elk eat, thus completing the ecological cycle that began one day when a bull died in a field. ■